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London's first post-War Concert Season

by

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R.C.M. London

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London's first post-War season of music reached its climax in a couple of outstandingly interesting events. One was the Twentieth Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music which covered the week July 6th to 14th with a chain of concerts conferences and receptions; the other was the re-opening, after seven years, of the Glyndebourne Opera House, on July 12th, with Benjamin Britten's new opera "The Rape of Lucretia". To be sure, Glyndebourne is not in London but lies fifty miles to the south among the Sussex Downs. But Glyndebourne in the past always formed a brilliant feature in the London season, and the same thing has happened again. It will be better, however, to postpone discussing Britten's new opera for a few weeks until the Glyndebourne production, which is now on a tour in the provinces, is brought to London itself for a short season at Sadlers Wells. ~~Britten's new opera~~ "The Rape of Lucretia" is too individual and masterly a work to be dismissed in a few sentences.

Before describing the International Festival it is worth glancing at the conditions which preceded it in this first, enigmatic post-War year. Prophets had not been lacking last autumn who ~~said~~ foretold the War-time enthusiasm for good music could not last; that the new audiences would revert to sports, swing, and crooning. If in a trifling degree ~~they~~ the prophets have been right, in the main they have been proved gloriously

wrong. London is as music-minded as ever, and infinitely more so than it was ten years ago. Tickets for fine concerts and operas are snapped up as eagerly as the proverbial worms by early birds. Nor is the enthusiasm confined to inner London. Quite recently the seats for an orchestral concert in a remote suburb could have been sold three times over, and this not for light music but for classical and romantic works - Beethoven and the Russians. Beethoven indeed has been the supreme figure during these troubled years. Whether or not it is true, That he once said of his music "Those who understand it must be freed by it from all the miseries which the others drag about with themselves," in actual practice that is exactly the effect it has had upon millions of listeners' minds.

The multiplicity of public orchestral and choral concerts, of chamber music concerts, of solo recitals, of private concerts, which has met this craving for music is beyond enumeration. But certain events shine out luminously in memory. There was that evening at the Royal Albert Hall when Casals made his reappearance at one of the British Broadcasting Corporation's orchestral concerts, and played Schumann's and Elgar's cello concertos with a beauty that seemed to come from another world. There are moments (they are rare) when a great musician becomes as one who administers a divine mystery. This was such an occasion. ~~The~~ So great was the ovation given Casals by the vast audience that it came near unsettling ~~almost unsettled~~ ~~down~~ even his marvellous calm. What have ~~the~~ these faithful people done, who so welcomed him then, that now he will not return to them for political reasons!

Another shining memory is of the December afternoon when the Royal Philharmonic Society devoted the third concert of its hundred and thirty fourth season to a birthday programme for Sibelius of his own works. It did not matter that Finland had become involved during the War as an enemy country: everyone, from Sir Thomas Beecham who conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra, down to the least player, was on his mettle to pay the finest tribute possible in music to a great composer whose music is beloved here, and the concert ended with a performance of Sibelius's Second Symphony that touched starry heights of passionate beauty.

Then there was the day when Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra from Manchester let us hear their sweet, sane art, and other days when international soloists such as Menuhin and Szigeti renewed their triumphs and Ginette Neveu from France made secure the niche she has won for herself here as a violinist. There were, too, the three recitals and three orchestral concerts before huge audiences at the Royal Albert Hall when Schnabel, under the auspices of the Philharmonia Society, made his reappearance and showed once again what a consummate master he is of the great classical style - a model from whose phrasing young interpreters may learn so much.

But alongside all this coming and going, British artists have consistently put up a fine record of good work done. Two of the most exciting chamber concerts of the year were those devoted, at Wigmore Hall, to Purcell, England's greatest composer, on the 250th anniversary of his death. The music performed was entirely by Purcell with the exception of two important new works composed by Benjamin

Britten in homage to Purcell. These were the String Quartet in C, Op.36 and "The Holy Sonnets of John Donne, Op. 35, for tenor and piano, both notable examples of Britten's ever-maturing art and, one believes, lasting assets to English music.

The National Gallery concerts, founded by Dame Myra Hess in 1939, continued throughout the winter, but alas! came to an end at Easter, because the Gallery is required once more for pictures. Whether or not the concerts are resumed in the future, for seven years they have been the delight of countless music lovers, have made others into lovers of music, and have become symbolic of War-time London. But the event which some experienced critics consider the most outstanding of the concert season was the first performance in England - and only the fourth or fifth performance in modern times - of Monteverdi's Vespers, composed in 1610, one of the world's great masterpieces in music. Thus, as has happened more than once in English musical history, a pioneering achievement was brought about by forces mainly amateur, working under the direction, and helped by, a few burningly enthusiastic, highly cultured professional musicians. Trained by Michael Tippett, one of the most significant younger British composers, and conducted by Walter Goehr, the Morley College choir and orchestra of working men and women gave a performance at the Central Hall, Westminster which, while it would be idle to say there were no flaws in it, yet succeeded triumphantly in setting forth the majestic beauty of the music and the nobility and audacity of Monteverdi's genius. The achievement reflected the more credit on all concerned because Monteverdi's style is far removed from the idioms of today

and no precedent existed in [redacted] previous performances here to help in rendering the work. So great was the interest roused by the "Vespers" that the whole concert was repeated a month later to a still larger audience on July 5, the eve of the Festival of Contemporary Music. A thoughtful observer at the Festival expressed the belief that today music is at the beginning of a new era, the "new music", of the early 17th century. It is a fascinating idea, but so far as this Festival was concerned no work comparable in genius to Monteverdi's "Vespers" emerged. That however did not prevent the Festival from being of extreme interest, for it provided, to the present writer at least, a remarkable view of what has been happening in the minds of musicians of many nations during the War years. This was apparent from the first concert - an orchestral one given in Covent Garden Opera House, with the British Broadcasting Corporation's Orchestra and a variety of conductors. At the one end of the emotional scale was Elsa Barraine's Second Symphony, (France, composed in 1938) already oppressed by a foreboding sadness: at the other was Prokofiev's "Ode to the end of the War" (Russia, 1945) in which a selection of instruments chosen for their powers of making a joyful noise (including four grand pianos and four harps) put up a terrific facade of jubilant sounds devoid of joy. ~~By a good piece of [redacted] planning, these works were placed side by side, and~~ They might be taken as typical of ~~typifying~~ a woman's and a man's view of War. Elsa Barraine's symphony, though not great, was good music, written straight from her heart and expressed in terms of admirable orchestral craftsmanship. The second movement, a Marche Funèbre closed with a touch of real composer's poetry - a short passage for solo violin, like a solitary mourner

against the soft background of orchestral tone. Few people seemed to know anything about her, which is not surprising as she devoted herself during the War to furthering the Resistance Movement in France, but her subsequent career will be watched with interest by women musicians in England. Of the other works at this concert the "Town-Piper Music" (1940) by Richard Mohaupt, once a German but now of America, turned out to be a cheerful, rather charming tone picture based on Dürer's painting of the Nürnberger Stadpfeifer - a reminder of the old Germany with its humane and home-loving elements. Charm rose to genuine beauty when the music hung poised upon a long, lovely harmony ushering in the quiet middle section. Three Symphonic Preludes by Elisabeth Lutyens, (1944) may be representative of herself, but are not ~~in the least~~ so of England. On a first hearing their salient features appeared to be intellectual speculations and pessimism. Thoughtful counterpoints drifted about the orchestra in cloudy, nebulously cohesive tones; yet they had the power of making themselves remembered, which usually means a work has more vitality than ~~may~~ appears on a first hearing. As to the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra by Robert de Roos (Holland 1943-44) its ~~clarity and~~ forthrightness ~~made one think~~ had the clarity of daylight. The solo part was ~~written~~ laid out in a massive manner that suggested organ-style and sonorities. If the third movement had reached the level of the first and second the work would have been better altogether, but the meaningless repetitions of an unsignificant rhythm hammered out again and again ended the concerto upon a note of bathos.

For the Chamber Concerts the scene shifted to the Hall of the

ancient and honourable Goldsmiths' Company in the City of London itself. It is rare for outsiders to be priveleged to use ~~the such a~~ hall, but whoever first thought of it in connection with this Festival had a happy inspiration. The hall is of an admirable size for chamber music and is easily accessible. The structure suffered hardly at all from adjacent bombings, and the rich decorations are intact. Here, on four long, light summer evenings, with Professor Edward J.Dent - the Acting President and prime mover in this Festival present, and a packed audience of members and friends, three concerts of contemporary chamber music were given and another was devoted to the works of England's greatest composer Henry Purcell (1659 - 1695). Not all the modern works were brand new. Schönberg's Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte, for reciter, string quartet, and pianoforte, had been heard here already in the version for string orchestra. But if ever music expressed concentrated hatred, it is this and it will stand as a ~~most~~ significant War document. Moreover, apart from its emotional interest Schönberg here seems to have solved the problem of combining spoken words with music more successfully than in his "Pierrot Lunaire". An Italian work which made a deep impression on all who heard it was that by Luigi Dallapiccola for chorus, percussion, harps, and two pianofortes. Named by him "Songs from Captivity", it consists in its complete state of (1) Mary Stuart's Prayer, (2) Boethius' Invocation, (3) Savonarola's Farewell. Only the last two were given at this concert. Technically they are distinguished by fine craftsmanship; and though not atonal they are fundamentally modern in their harmonic texture. But what winged the music straight into the sympathies of the hearers was its intensity of feeling. "These are they which came

out of great tribulation" one said to oneself. At one of the other concerts that week another work was performed which also came out of captivity, but in this case it took the form of a mystical, apocalyptic quartet for violin, cello, clarinet and piano by Olivier Messiaen (France 1940) called "Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps". Here was a man to whom in captivity had come the vision of that transcendental freedom where Time is nothing and Eternity everything. His eight movements were each touched with a strange, unworldly quality; some were exceedingly lovely, and the scoring had often an almost etherial frugality which yet was never untender, except where the composer intended fierce effects, as in the "Danse de la fureur", which was plangently aggressive.

Other compositions not so definitely connected with the War still showed its influence. The Fifth String Quartet by Jerzy Fitelberg (Poland and America, 1945) was music in which the ideas drifted hither and thither like exiles without an aim. Albert Moeschinger's Sonatina for Clarinet and Piano (Switzerland 1944) was ~~just~~ an attractive little piece of pastoral Switzerland, isolated from the world, and ~~immune from~~ able to forget at times its terrible problems. Sten Broman's Second String Quartet (Sweden) brought with it a refreshing vigour and sanity of outlook. The composer's plan of two movements interwoven to form one is unusual and not easy to bring off as a success. Brahms tried it in the second movement of his "A major" Violin Sonata, with rather unsettling effect to the movement as a whole. Sten Broman handles his two-fold material so deftly that, if anything, he has succeeded too well; the work impresses one as a unity, not a duality. But its over-all unity is the measure of its organic strength

and, one may add, of its charm for the listeners. It was admirably played by the Blech Quartet and was ~~cordially~~ cordially received by the large audience. String quartets were indeed a feature of this Festival. Krenek's Seventh is not a particularly interesting specimen of his style, but it was at least thoroughly representative. Hindemith's String Quartet in E flat (1943) was a beautiful example of his own perfected technical methods and moreover, was beautiful as music. Here, one felt, was the work of a powerful mind at peace with itself. A special word of recognition is due to the Hungarian Quartet for playing it in a way it would be hard to excel. Stravinsky's Sonata for two pianos (1943-44) was neither a new nor significant sample of his idiosyncratic art. The Suite for Violin and Piano by Zavadil (Czechoslovakia) was slight but pleasing.

It was a strange experience to come away from these concerts, in which the music had brought together so many nations, and then to turn up a little alley between shells of buildings and come suddenly upon a view of one of our own quiet griefs - a great devastated area in the City (of London), acre after acre of low, open ruins. ~~such as might have belonged to Pompeii.~~ Where before the War had been buildings humming with human lives and work, there now grew pink willow herb, wild fern, and golden yellow weeds, in a great silence beneath the half moon, with the spire of Bow Church beyond, ~~still left as a landmark,~~ taking the last sunset glow. No wonder the Goldsmiths' Hall had seemed so quiet for music!

The programme on July 12th, still at the Goldsmiths' Hall, consisted of works for Chamber Orchestra, performed by the Boyd Neel Orchestra, the B.B.C. Chorus, and several soloists and conductors.

America was represented by William Schuman's Symphony for String Orchestra (1943), Poland by Andrzef Fannfik's Five Folk-Tunes for Children, Austria by Webern's Cantata for Soprano Solo, Chorus, and Orchestra; and Hungary-France by Tibor Harsanyi's Divertiments No. 2 for String Orchestra and Trumpet. ~~It was~~ Unfortunately the date clashed with the first night of the Glyndebourne Opera Season, so the present writer did not hear the concert.

The Festival ended with a big orchestral programme at Covent Garden Opera House on Sunday July 14. This was altogether more brilliant than the previous ones, ~~both because the works were more distinguished and partly because~~ and the performances were consistently on a high level. "Corteges" by Alan Rawsthorne (England) is not one of his newest things but it made a good send-off, seeming all the more colourful by contrast with Raymond Loucheur's dreamy "Nocturne" in which the influence of Wagner's "Tristan" predominated. But the first real thrill that day was the discovery, in Eugenia Uminska, of a violinist of outstanding merit. Roman Palester's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra bristles with difficulties. She surmounted them with élan, proving herself a faultless virtuoso, and, better still, an artist whose heart, mind, and soul flowed into her playing. The other "thrill" was the superb performance of Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra. In this dazzling work every department of the band is given a chance to excel itself, and the B.B.C. orchestra under its own conductor Sir Adrian Boult rose to the occasion magnificently. In sheer orchestral virtuosity and the exhilaration which occasionally seizes the players when a fine band is revelling in the full exercise of its powers, this performance would have been hard to beat. It ended the Festival upon

a note of triumph - the right sort of homage to the memory of Bartok, one of the greatest, and most dynamic musicians of modern times.

Since the International Society for Contemporary Music exists primarily to perform ~~their~~ new music, the main stress of this short account has been placed upon the compositions rather than on the performers, but among the artist there was just the same free mingling of nationalities. Conductors, singers and instrumentalists did their best - (and usually this best was of outstanding excellence) - to present the new works under the most favourable conditions. ~~Warm tributes are due to them~~. Recognition also is due to the General Management Committee for their ~~clever planning and~~ unremitting care over the Festival arrangements. Time was even found to take the Foreign Delegates to see the historic sights of London, to let them hear English Church music at St Paul's Cathedral and Brompton Oratory, and to take them to Glyndebourne to hear Benjamin Britten's new opera. If they enjoyed their visit to London as much as their English fellow-members liked having them, then the Festival will have fulfilled another ~~both~~ of the functions for which the International Society for Contemporary Music was founded.